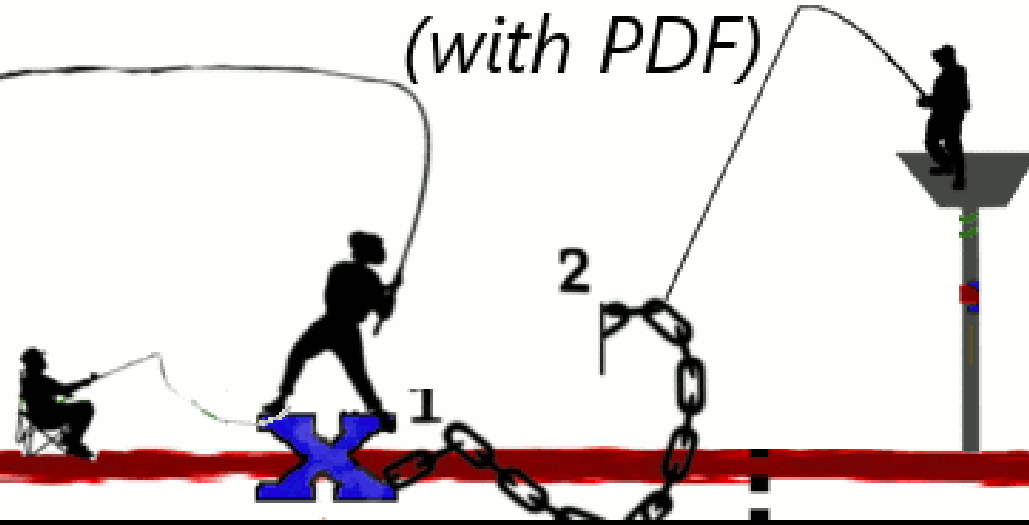




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THE BIG, FAT ENGLISH TENSES OVERVIEW

(with PDF)



I'd like to start this post by saying that grammar isn't important.

There. I said it.

What I mean is that academic research shows us that when we know a language well, we think more in phrases, not so much in grammar rules.

It's like when we learn our own language as children — we learn in phrases, not in grammar rules.

More and more academics now believe that second-language learning is more effective when you base it on phrases instead of rules.

So why am I writing a “big, fat English tenses overview”?

Well, although it's important to learn a language by focusing on phrases, grammar plays a neat role.

Actually it's a bit like an old-fashioned radio.

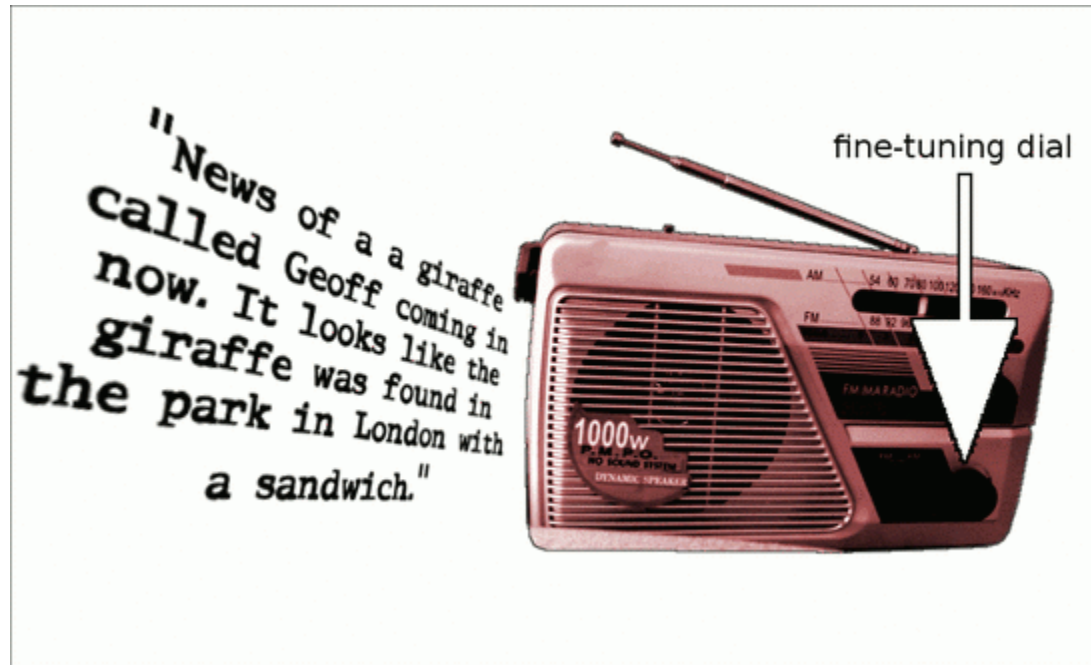


Do you remember these? There are two dials on the radio. If you move one of them (let's call it the "general dial"), you'll eventually find the general area of a radio station.

But sometimes the sound isn't perfect and you can't understand all the details:



So you need to turn the “fine tuning” dial. This will find the more specific frequency so that you can hear everything clearly.



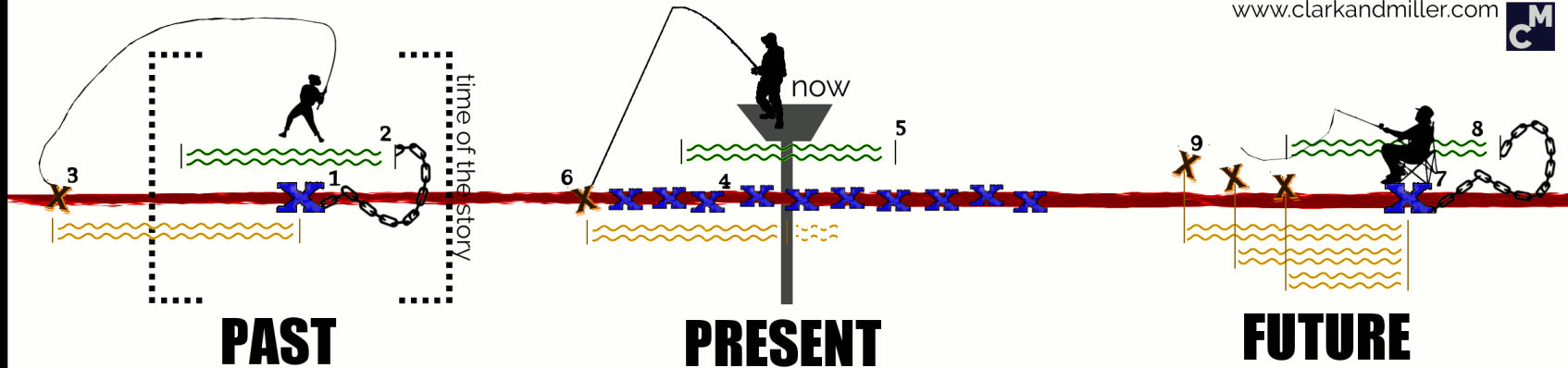
It's the same with English. Phrases and vocabulary are the “general dial.”

Grammar is the “fine tuning.”

So would you just like to be understood? Or would you like to speak English with awesome “fine tuning”?

I’m guessing you went with the “fine tuning” answer. So let’s look at the technical “fine tuning” of English, step by step.

First, take a look at this rather complex image:



PAST

PRESENT

FUTURE

1. Past simple



Describes main events or states in the past

Make sure the speaker and the listener know when this happened.
Use with past time phrases: yesterday, last week, when you were 12

2. Past continuous



Describes the "background" events and actions in the story

Always use with the past simple or another past continuous tense
or
when both the speaker and the listener know the context.

3. Past perfect (and past perfect continuous)



Describes actions and events that happened before the story time

Always use with the past simple
or
when both the speaker and the listener know the context.

4. Present simple



Describes actions that happen regularly

or
statements that are always true

5. Present continuous



Describes actions happening now

Especially:
unfinished actions
changing actions
temporary actions

6. Present perfect (and present perfect continuous)



Describes actions and events that are connected to the present

The time frame started in the past and is continuing.
The effect of a past action is still important now.
The action started in the past and is continuing now.

7. Future simple



Describes single actions in the future

different forms including:

"will"
"going to"

8. Future continuous



Describes long actions in the future

Make sure the speaker and the listener know when this will happen.

Use to describe actions and events that are "under control."

9. Future perfect (and future perfect continuous)



Describes actions that will happen at some point in the future

Always connect it to a specific time in the future.

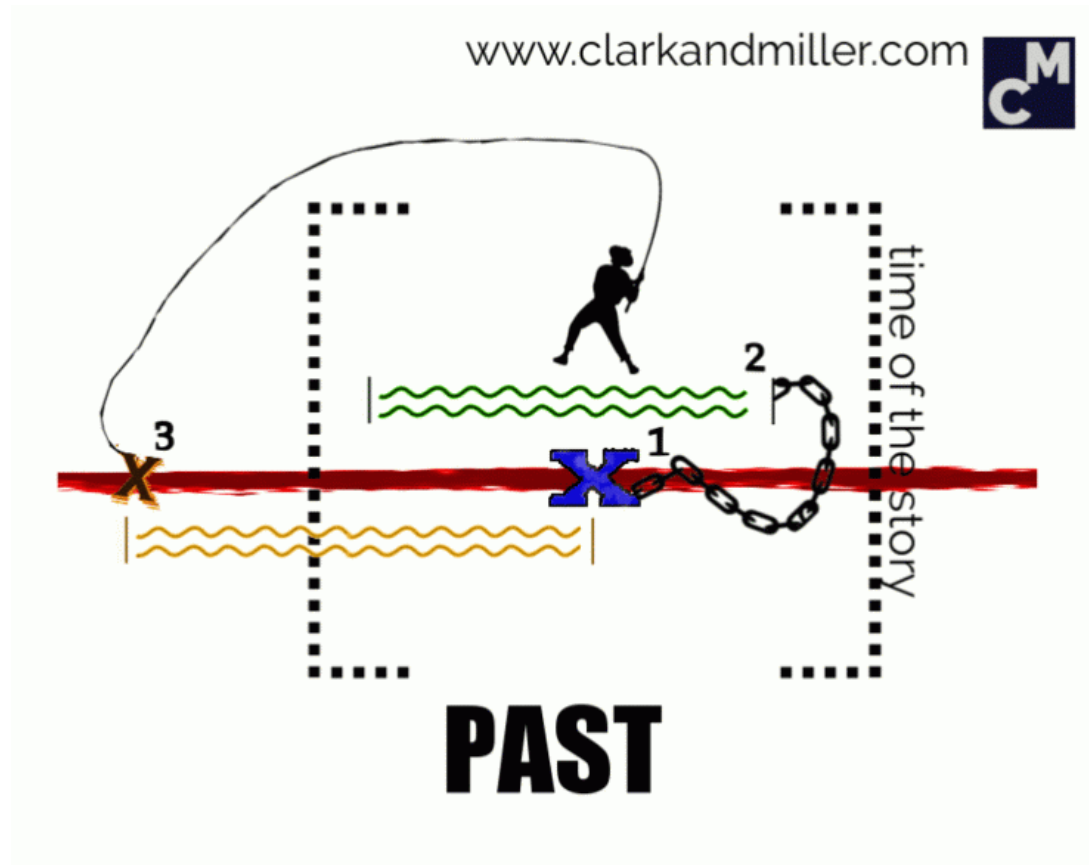
Good for describing deadlines

OK. Here are all the main English tenses in all their beauty.

Yes, it's a little confusing at first, but don't panic! Most of these are actually the same tense, just moved a little in time. (Notice the colours. And the fishermen.)

Let's start with the past...

The past tenses in English



What's going on here?

OK, so as you can see, we have three main tenses going on. We'll look at these one by one, but first take a look at the “time of the story” frame. Why is that there?

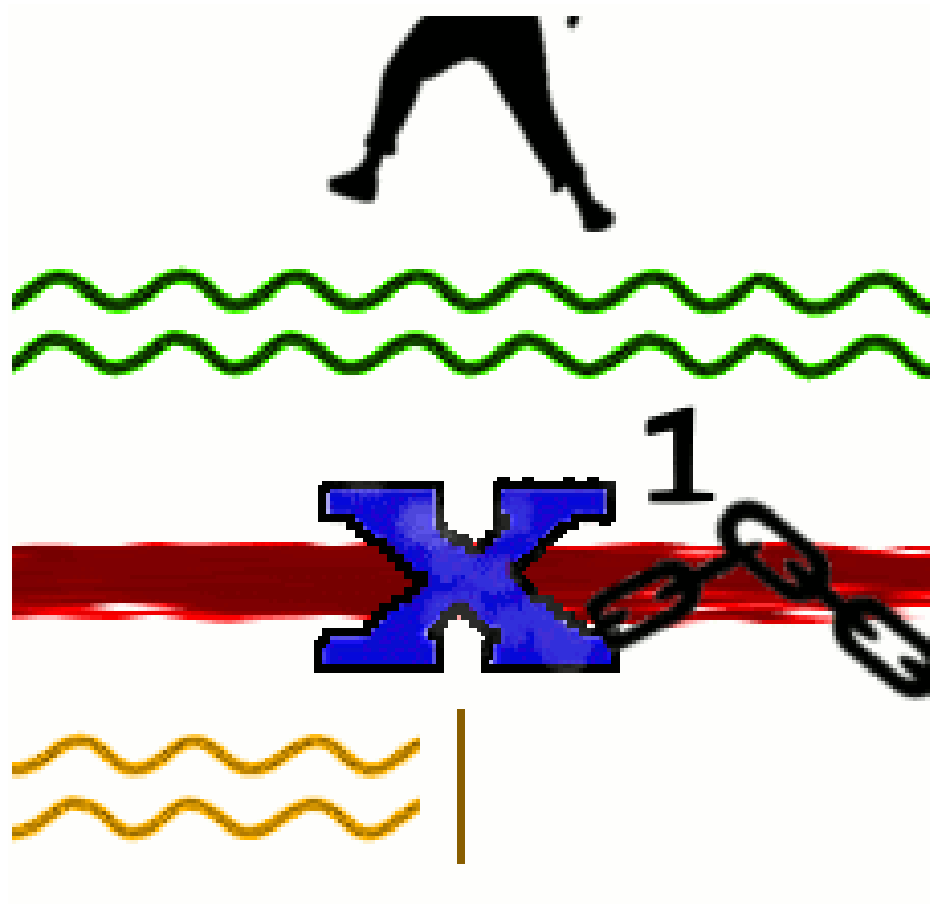
When we talk about the **present**, we're just looking at what's happening now and reporting it.

When we talk about the **future**, we're making plans and predictions. Nothing is completely certain (most of the time).

But when we talk about the **past**, we're actually telling a story. In English it's very important to be clear about the time of the story.

If we go outside this story time frame, it's important that we show it so that our story is clear and we understand what happened first and what happened second and, most importantly, what happened outside the story time frame.

1. The past simple



Why do we use it?

We use the past simple if we want to express a single action that happened in the past:

I met a very friendly giraffe on my last visit here.

...or a state in the past:

Picasso lived in that house for most of his life.

What's the feeling of this tense?

The past simple is the most important tense for telling our story — it describes the main events in our story.

How do we use it?

Some people love grammar tables. (I don't!) So here's how it looks when you make it all technical:

The Past Simple

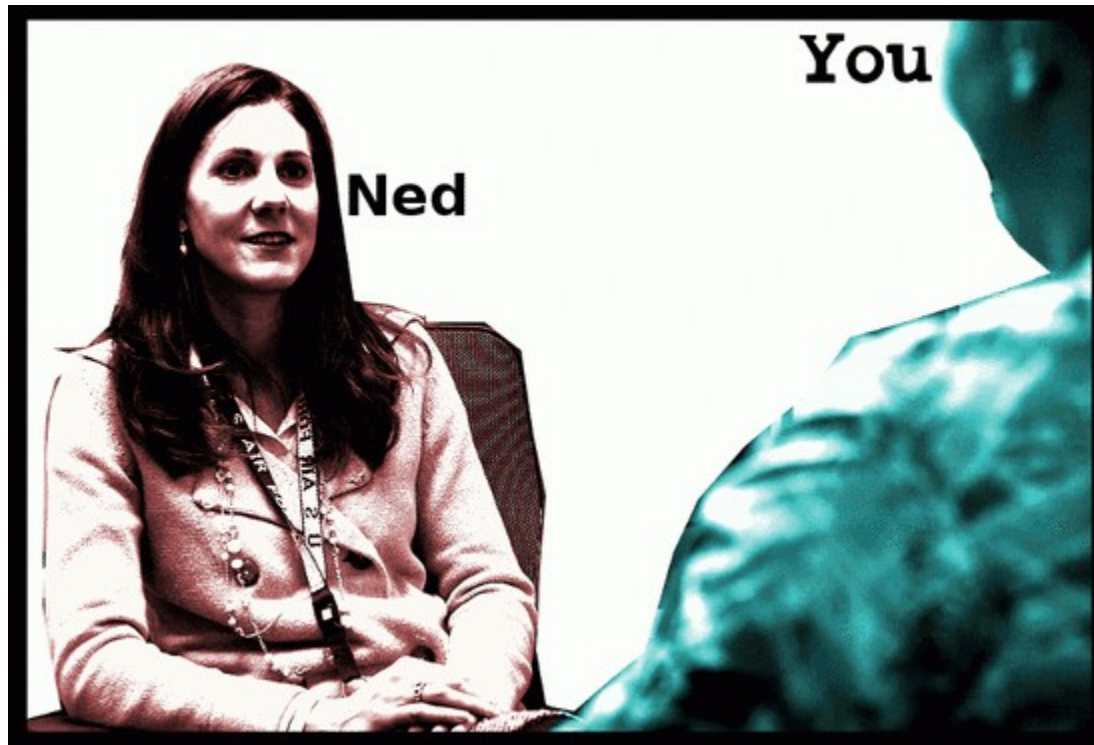
+	-	?
V2	didn't + V1	did + subject + V1
He left his bike outside.	He didn't remember a thing.	Did the building fall down again?

V = verb; V1 = present; V2 = past; V3 = past participle

Weird rules?

OK. I want to talk about something quickly here.

When we're talking about language, it's very useful to think about two people: the person speaking and the person listening. I'm going to call them "you" and "Ned":



That's because language isn't just a technical thing. It's about the situation and the people using it.

And most importantly: who knows what?

When we use the past simple, it's very important that both people in the conversation (you and Ned) know when the action happened. This is when we establish the story time frame.

Maybe we need to say it:

Something really weird happened to me **last night**.

...or perhaps you've already started talking about it, so you don't need to say it again:

FRED: Something really weird happened to me **last night**.

ANDY: Really? What happened **last night**?

FRED: I met a really angry giraffe **last night**.

2. The past continuous



Why do we use it?

We use the past continuous to talk about:

1. Long actions in the past:

It was raining cats and dogs* outside.

*Raining cats and dogs = raining very hard

2. Repeated actions in the past:

She was taking the bus that week instead of the train.

What's the feeling of this tense?

The past continuous is an important tense to help create atmosphere in our story.

While the past simple is the main action in our story, the past continuous gives us extra information about the background events.

How do we use it?

The Past Continuous

+	-	?
was / were + -ing	wasn't / weren't + -ing	was / were + subject + -ing
Those giraffes were swimming in the pool again.	I just wasn't thinking properly.	Were you feeding the donkey at the time?

Weird rules?

We (almost) always use the past continuous with the past simple. It's "chained" to the main events of the story. (See the chain in the picture?)

We sometimes connect the past continuous with words like:

- "when" (with the past simple)
- "while" or "as" (with the past continuous)

While I was eating my dinner, I saw the most beautiful sunset.

or

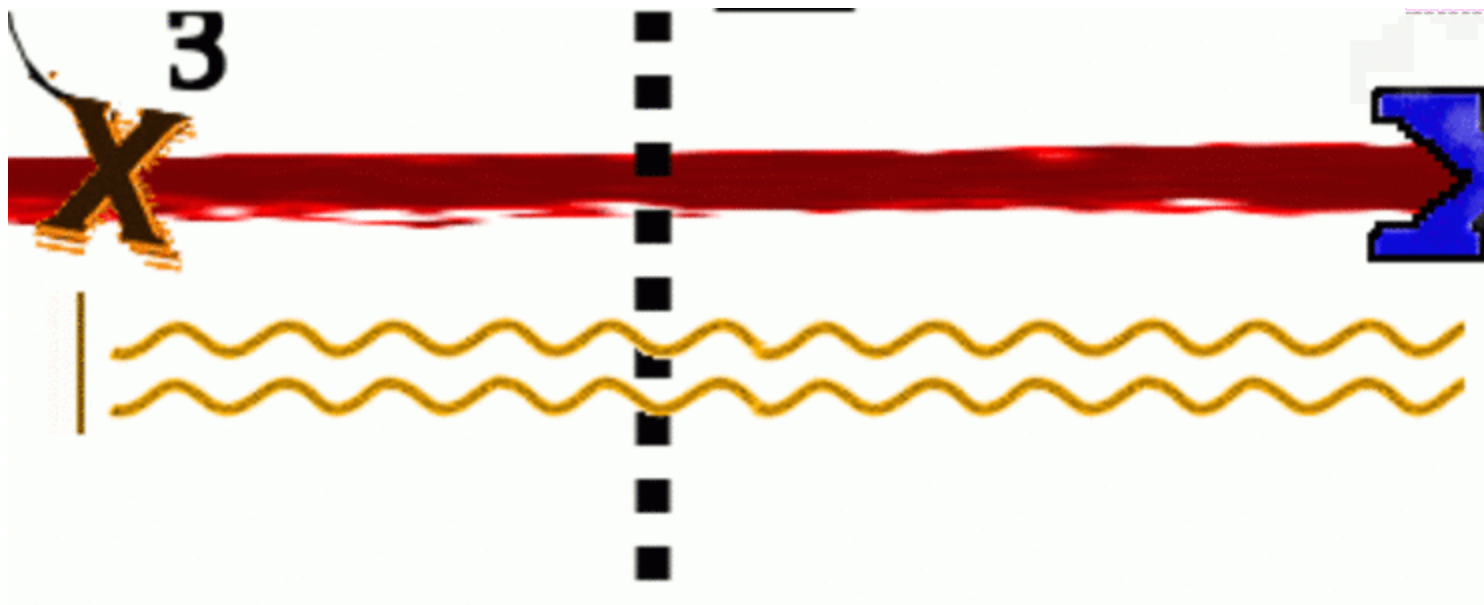
When he came into the room, everyone was sleeping.

But again, this depends on how much the person speaking and the person listening know. If both of them understand the context, then we don't need to connect the past continuous with the past simple:

ANNA: How did you meet Rents?

SAM: It's a pretty boring story actually — we were working together.

3. The past perfect (and the past perfect continuous)



Why do we use it?

We use the past perfect when we want to add some information to our story, but the information happened before the story time frame.

This is when we become fishermen. When we use this tense, we're actually "fishing" it from before the story.

What's the feeling of this tense?

The past perfect tense, like all the perfect tenses, is a magic tense.

Why is it magic?

Because when we use the past perfect tense, we're in two places at once. We're in the time of the story but we're connected to another time, before the story happened — without leaving the story time.

The fishing line keeps us connected to both times.

The only real difference between the past perfect and the past perfect continuous is:

- We use the past perfect for single, short actions.

- We use the past perfect continuous for long actions or repeated actions.

How do we use it?

The Past Perfect

+	-	?
had + V3	hadn't + V3	had + subject + V3
He started feeling ill because he'd had bacon for breakfast .	They hadn't checked the weather forecast.	Had you already met him before?

The Past Perfect Continuous

+	-	?
had + been + -ing	hadn't + been + -ing	had + subject + been + -ing
They'd been watching TV all day.	They hadn't been checking the security system	Had you been doing exercise?

Weird rules?

Like the past continuous, the past perfect is always connected to the past simple somehow (because the past simple shows the main events in our story. No past simple? No story!).

We can connect these two tenses directly with a connecting word or phrase like “when,” “because” or “earlier that day”:

I trusted him because he'd given me awesome advice before.

Perhaps we use it to show the relationship between two actions with a relative clause:

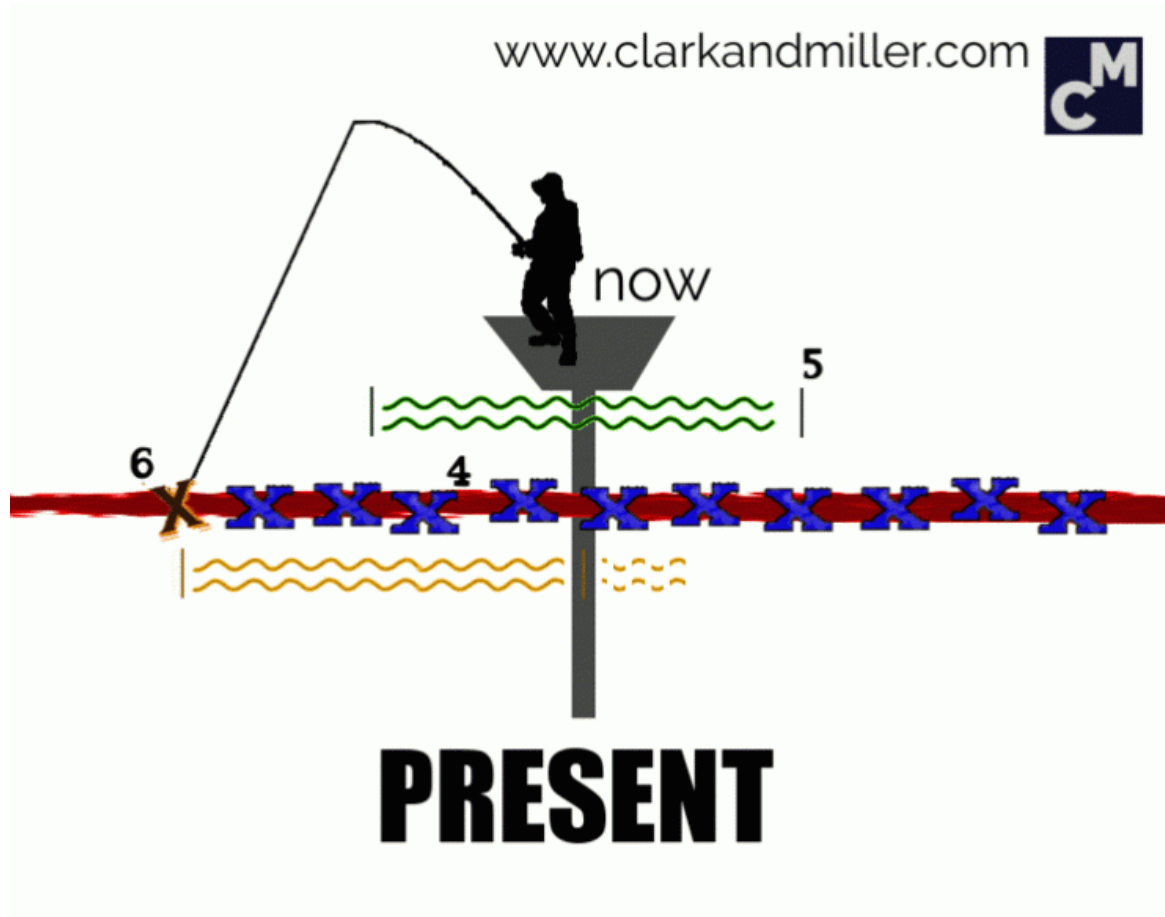
I knew that he'd been working on the project all week.

Or perhaps we don't need to connect it in the sentence because both the person speaking and the person listening already know the connection:

MAXINE: You were so filthy that day!

LIN: Yeah. We'd been playing football in the rain.

The present tenses in English



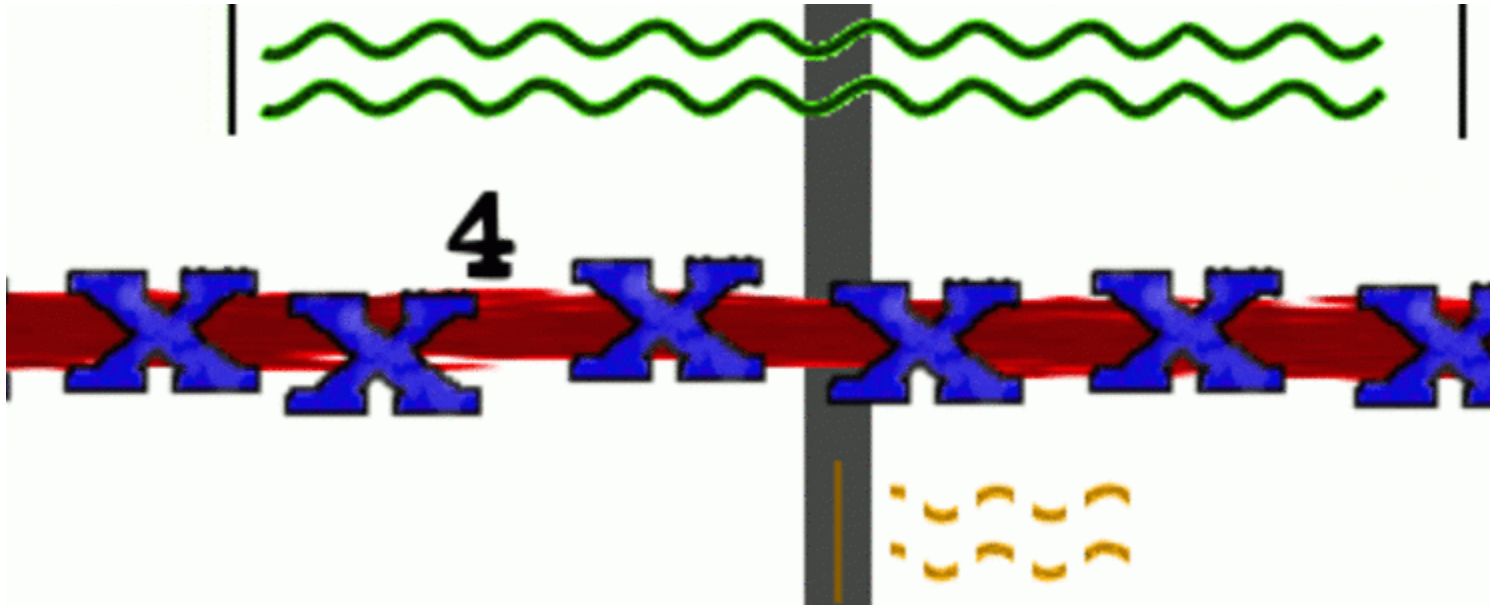
What's going on here?

As I mentioned before, we use the present tenses to describe things around us. It's more "scientific" or "analytical." We're observing the world and reporting it.

There are three main tenses for the present — the present simple, the present continuous and the present perfect (and its best friend, the present perfect continuous).

Let's look at these one by one.

4. The present simple



Why do we use it?

We use the present simple to describe actions that happen regularly:

She meets Geoff every morning for breakfast.

...or things that are always true:

We live in London.

What's the feeling of this tense?

When we use the present simple, there's a strong feeling of "truth." It describes things that don't change. We also feel habits and regular lifestyle choices.

It's kind of like a traditional uncle.

How do we use it?

The Present Simple

+	-	?
V1	don't / doesn't + V1	do / does + subject + V1
We never get up before 11. She hates Titanic.	She doesn't know the answer.	Do they know how long that trip is?

Weird rules?

When we use the present simple with “he,” “she” or “it,” we need to add “s” to the verb:

My sister always listens to the worst music in the world.

And “do” becomes “does” in questions and negative sentences:

Geoff doesn't know you very well, does he?

Does Obama really know your sister? I don't believe you!

Surprising other uses

We can also use the present simple for:

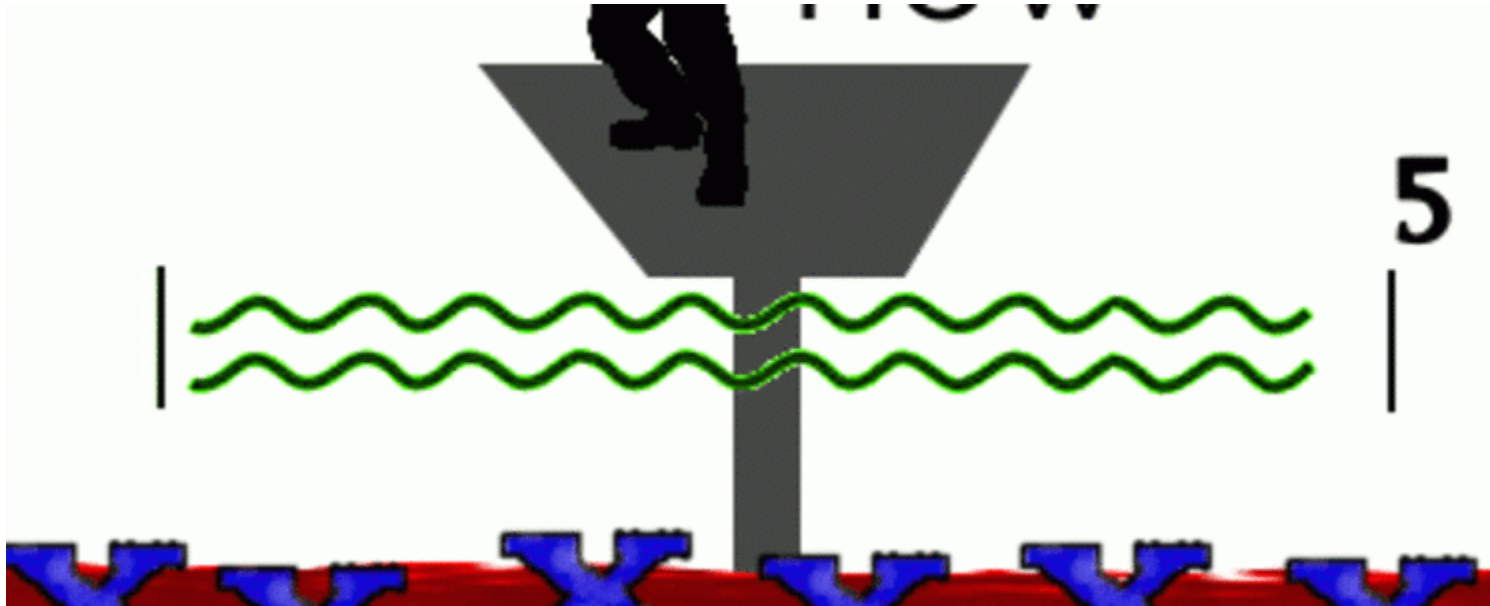
Scheduled events in the future:

The train leaves at 7 o'clock.

Describing a story or a joke:

Three giraffes walk into a bar...

5. The present continuous



Why do we use it?

Generally speaking, we use the present continuous for things that are happening now. Especially:

Temporary situations:

I'm taking the bus this week because my bike's broken.

Unfinished actions:

I'll call you later — I'm having lunch at the moment.

Changing situations:

He's really getting better at playing the organ.

What's the feeling of this tense?

If the present simple is like a traditional uncle, then the present continuous is like the crazy cousin.

While the present simple is all about permanence (not changing), the present continuous is all about change. It feels dynamic and active.

How do we use it?

The Present Continuous

+	-	?
am / is / are + -ing	am / is / are + not + -ing	am / is / are + subject + -ing
He's talking to the tree again.	We aren't sleeping. We're meditating.	Why are you doing that?

Weird rules?

There's an interesting rule about when you can't use the present continuous.

When we talk about an action that we can't control, then we (almost) never use the present continuous. We have to use the present simple instead.

These actions are usually connected to:

- Feelings: “I love this song.” (not “I’m loving this song.”)
- Thoughts: “I believe you now.” (not “I’m believing you now.”)
- Heights, weights, dimensions, etc.: “It weighs 100 kg.” (not “It’s weighing 100 kg.”)

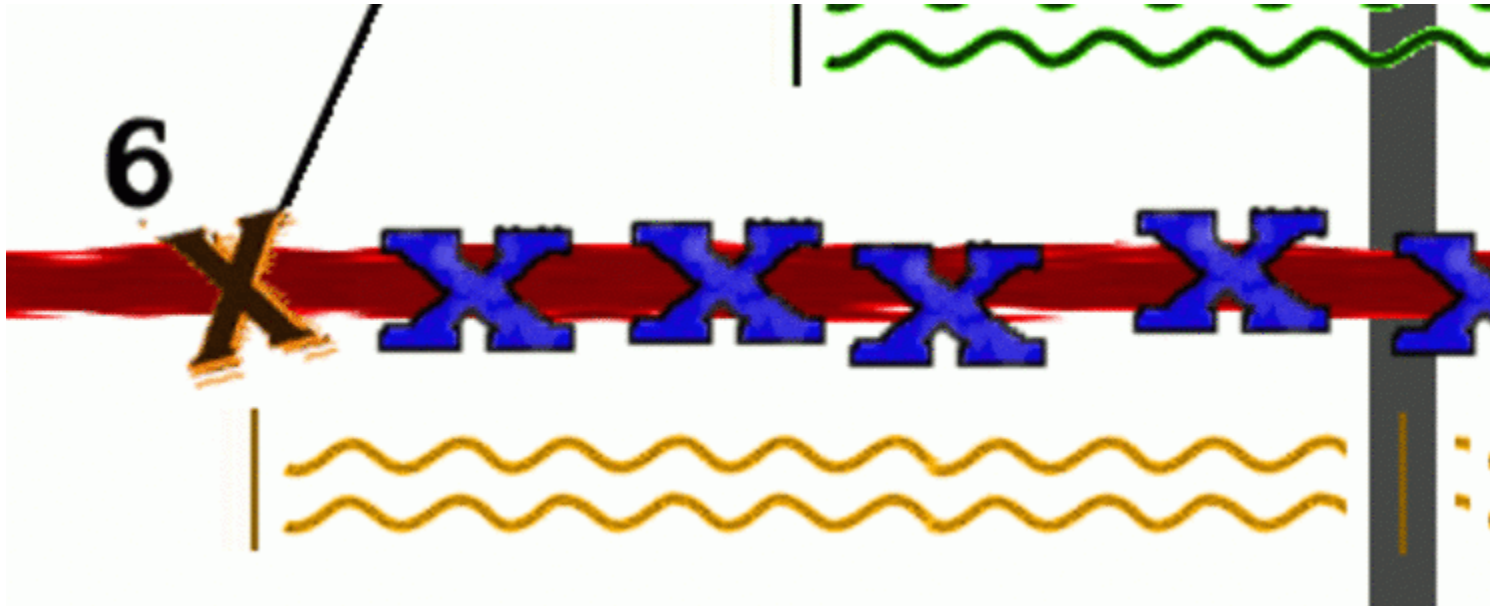
Surprising other uses

We can also use the present continuous to describe unusual or annoying habits, usually with words like “always,” “constantly” or “forever.”

My dog is always eating potatoes.

He’s forever singing that stupid song.

6. The present perfect (and present perfect continuous)



Why do we use it?

Like I said before, the perfect tenses are like magic.

With the present perfect, you're in the present, but you've got a strong connection to the past.

What makes the connection?

We're connected to the past with the present perfect in three general situations:

1. When the time frame we use started in the past and isn't finished: "Have you eaten today?"
2. When the effect of a past action is still with us now: "Look at the terrible thing you've done!"
3. When the action started in the past and isn't finished: "I've known him for years."

What's the feeling of this tense?

When we use the present perfect, we're actually talking about the "state" or the "situation" something is in now — but because of something before.

If you say that you've been working here for 5 years, we don't think about the work. We think about how experienced you are **now**.

If you say that you've had your hair cut, we don't think about your visit to the hairdresser's. We think about how you look NOW.

We're feeling the past echo into now — the results of past actions and events.

The only real difference between the present perfect and the present perfect continuous is:

- We use the present perfect for single, short actions.
- We use the present perfect continuous for long actions or repeated actions.

How do we use it?

The Present Perfect

+	-	?
have / has + V3	haven't / hasn't + V3	have / has + subject + V3

You've changed your hair again.	She hasn't slept for days.	Where have you been?
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The Present Perfect Continuous

+	-	?
have / has + been + -ing	haven't / hasn't + been + -ing	have / has + subject + been + -ing
I've been playing football.	My car hasn't been working well recently.	Has Geoff been coming in late again recently?

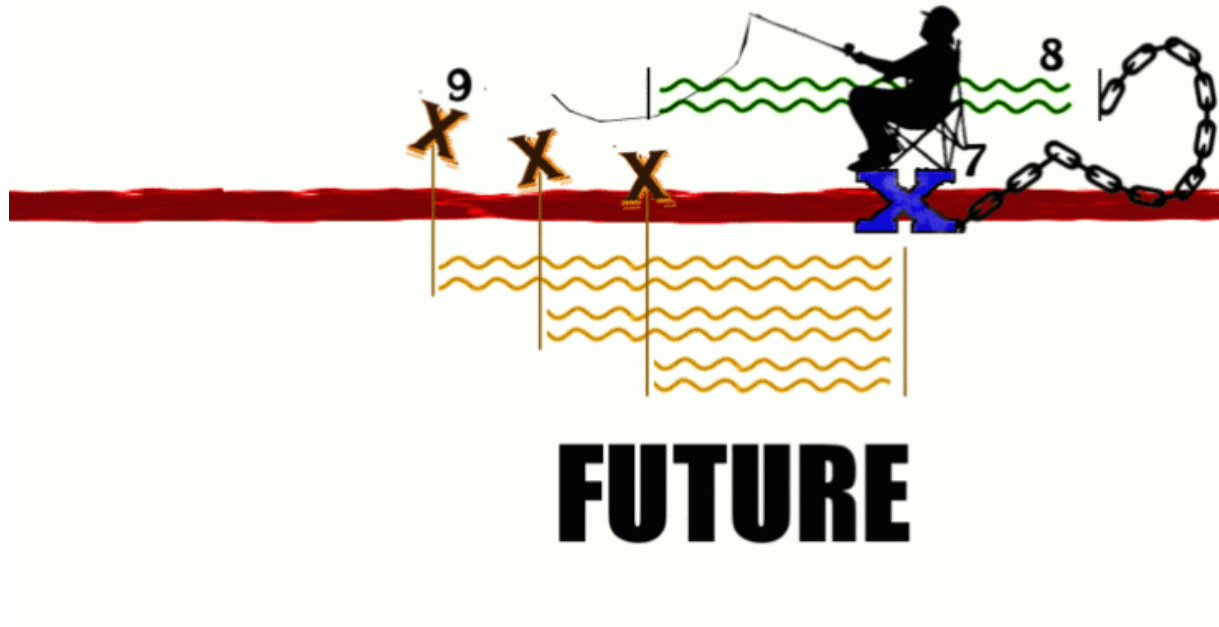
Weird rules?

Surprisingly, apart from the fact that the present perfect is a bit of a weird tense, there aren't really any strange rules.

You can find out more about the present perfect in [our blog post about it](#).

The future tenses in English

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What's going on here?

The future is a mysterious time. Nothing is certain! We have plans and goals, but plans can change and problems can stop our goals.

But the future can also feel like a time of hope.

As you can probably feel already from the past and the present, English has three basic types of tense (the simple, the continuous and the perfect), which we can move from past to present to future.

The future tenses work just like the other tenses. They're just in the future, so they have less certainty.

7. The future simple



Why do we use it?

We use the future simple when we want to talk about a single action in the future.

This is an interesting tense because we can use it in many ways. The most common are “will” and “going to.”

What’s the feeling of this tense?

The feeling of the future simple depends completely on which way we use it — with “will” or “going to.”

I wrote [a blog post about these future forms](#) (and many others). But to give you a simple explanation:

- For intentions, “will” is more spontaneous and “going to” is more of a plan;
- For predictions, “will” is less certain and “going to” is more certain.

How do we use it?

The Future Simple: Will

+	-	?
will + V1	won't + V1	will + subject + V1
It'll rain tomorrow.	The police won't find him.	Will there be cake at the party?

The Future Simple: Going To

+	-	?
am / is / are + going to + V1	am / is / are + not + going to + V1	am / is / are + subject + going to + V1
He's going to fall.	We aren't going to meet him tonight -- change of plan.	Is his colleague going to tell the boss about this?

Weird rules?

Again, this depends on which future form you use. I recommend checking [the post on future forms](#) for more detail.

Surprising other uses

We can also use “will” to describe present habits. In this case, it can actually replace the present simple:

These dogs will bark, but they won't bite.

Of course it'll snow. It's January.

8. The future continuous



Why do we use it?

We use the future continuous to talk about long or repeated actions in the future.

What's the feeling of this tense?

This tense feels very certain. When you use this tense, it sounds as if you have strong plans and a good schedule.

How do we use it?

The Future Continuous

+	-	?
will + be + -ing	won't + be + -ing	will + subject + be + -ing
They'll be sitting in the plane this time tomorrow.	I won't be working any more when I'm 55.	Will he still be helping us after we've paid him?

Weird rules?

Like the past continuous, the future continuous can only work with another certain time in the future. (See the chain in the image?)

We usually either say the time:

This time tomorrow, I'll be drinking lemonade on a sunny beach.

Or we can connect it to a simple action in the future:

When I get home tomorrow, I'm sure he'll be sleeping again.

Or both the person speaking and the person listening know the time:

ANTON: His birthday's going to be excellent.

ALEX: Is it?

ANTON: For sure! We'll be dancing all night!

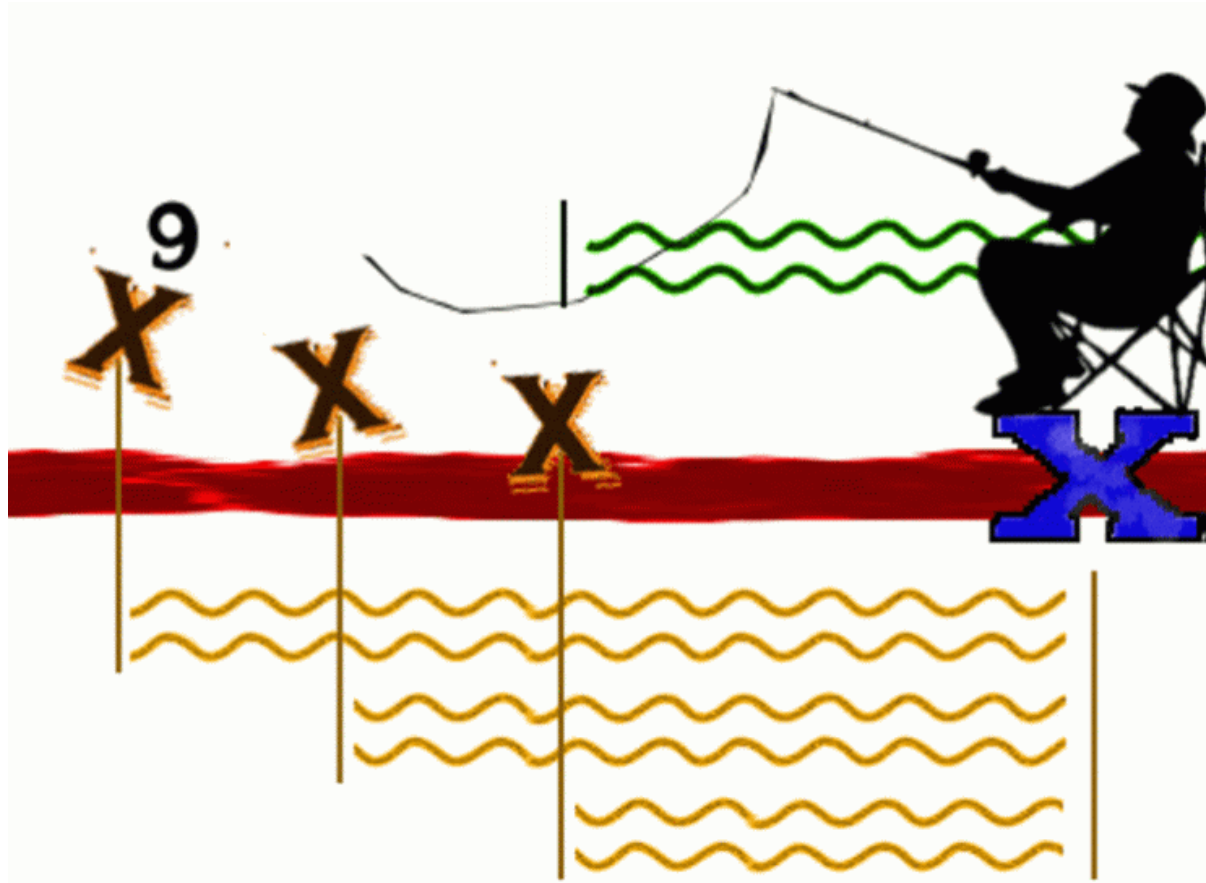
ALEX: Hmmm... Will there be cake?"

Surprising other uses

We use the future continuous a lot when we want people to feel that everything is under control. The classic example of this is when your pilot talks to you about your flight:

Good afternoon. This is your captain speaking. Today we'll be flying at a height of 40,000 feet and at speed of 900 km/h. In a few minutes our cabin crew will be serving drinks and refreshments...

9. The future perfect (and the future perfect continuous)



Why do we use it?

This is an interesting tense.

Notice that there's more than one orange "X" in the image. Why?

That's because when we use the future perfect, we don't actually say when the action will happen. It could be the time of the first "X," the time of the second "X" or the time of the third "X." We don't know. Because it's the future.

We use this tense to say that something will happen sometime before a certain point in the future. But we don't know when. Because it's the future.

The fisherman is sitting at that certain point and he's connecting himself to the past of that future.

What's the feeling of this tense?

We usually use this tense to set goals. When we make a deadline, we can use this tense:

I'll have made a million dollars before I'm 35 years old!

But we can also simply use it when we want to make a prediction about the future, but we don't know exactly when it will happen.

Sometime before I die, people will have started living on Mars.

How do we use it?

The Future Perfect

+	-	?
will + have + V3	won't + have + V3	will + subject + have + V3
I'll already have arrived at the hotel when you get there.	My boss won't have left the office by that time.	Will they have finished when we get there?

The Future Perfect continuous

+	-	?
will + have been + -ing	won't + have been + -ing	will + subject + have been + -ing

He will have been travelling for 18 hours when we see him.	By August I won't have been smoking for a year.	Will you have been working all day when I see you tomorrow?
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Weird rules?

Like the past perfect, we need to connect the future perfect to a certain future time (the “X” to the fisherman).

Again, we can just say the time:

By 2027, I'll have started my own business.

Or we can connect it with words like “when,” “by the time...” and “before.”

By the time he gets here, we'll have already left.

Or it can just be clear from the conversation:

NORA: So we'll see you at the airport?

LUCY: No, no. We will have gone by then.

So those are all the main tenses in English.

However, remember that language is a living, breathing thing. It doesn't follow all the rules. Just like people, it likes to break the rules from time to time. So don't follow these precisely all the time. You're allowed to break them if you want to express something in a particular way, or if you want to sound more like the people you're talking to. (I do it all the time.)